

SPECIAL ANALYSIS

TEL SALVADOR: Government's Performance and Problems

El Salvador's provisional government is having some success in improving its human rights record, carrying out the reform process, and professionalising the armed forces. The chaotic economic situation and political divisiveness, however, leave the government vulnerable to political crises and military setbacks.

The government has arrested and charged civilian vigilantes and security force personnel with specific political killings. Members of the official civil defense force have been apprehended for the murders of peasants suspected of supporting the left.

The military commission investigating the killings in January 1981 of two US labor advisers has made considerable progress. New witnesses have come forward, and investigators believe they can now identify the killers and their accomplices—several officers and enlisted members of the National Guard and wealthy businessmen.

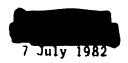
The government and military also have publicly renewed their pledge to put the reform process into effect. The controversial assembly decree that postponed further distribution of most lands under Phase III of the agrarian reform has been clarified. A special committee that includes a senior military officer and a top leader of the largest farmworkers' union has been established to oversee future revisions in the reforms.

In addition, the government has accelerated the awarding of both provisional and permanent land titles to peasants, and the armed forces have begun to intervene against landowners who have illegally evicted peasant renters. Rural labor leaders, who earlier were concerned over possible reversals in the reform process, now say they are more confident of the regime's commitment to carry it out.

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Problems Persist

The agrarian reform issue underscores the government's difficulty in satisfying both the social needs of the peasant population and the economic concerns of the urban classes. Much of the land affected by the reform is devoted to export crops, which provide foreign exchange and funds needed to purchase imports for the productive sectors. As production declines, unemployment and underemployment—currently estimated at 50 percent—will worsen.

The government depends heavily on international financial aid to keep the economy afloat. The level of such aid is largely determined by foreign donors' views of the regime's political capabilities and intentions.

Deep personal and ideological rifts probably will continue to plaque the provisional government. Personal vendettas and lack of dialogue and compromise among politicians will complicate proceedings in a 60-member constituent assembly comprised of four disparate conservative parties and the liberal Christian Democrats. The lack of legal and parliamentary experience among most legislators also will continue to cause problems.

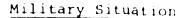
The executive branch is more professional. It also is divided, however, among the major parties and headed by a nonpartisan president who appears unwilling to test fully the powers of his office.

President Magana views himself as an interim mediator among rival political interests. Although strong willed and outspoken, he seeks to avoid straining the fragile power-sharing arrangement among the parties and the military.

The armed forces appear united in their support for the civilian government and in keeping their distance from partisan politics. Senior officers, however, will insist on the need to increase domestic and international confidence in the regime and to secure the foreign aid needed to rebuild the economy and defeat the insurgents. The high command has established its own policy committee to communicate its views to the civilian government.

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The government's mixed political record is matched by the military's spotty performance on the battlefield. The costly recapture of the towns of San Fernando and Perquin, for example, highlighted both the strengths and deficiencies of the armed forces.

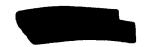
The fighting in Morazan Department was perhaps the most intense of the two-year conflict, and government forces suffered substantial casualties. They were handicapped by poor intelligence preparation and by command and control, logistic and communications problems.

The rapid deployment of several thousand well-equipped troops, however, showed significant improvement in quick-reaction capabilities. The armed forces also showed better coordination in the last days of the fighting. They were supported by six newly arrived US A-37 ground attack aircraft and by three Honduran infantry battalions that helped block insurgent escape routes across the border.

The guerrillas will be hard pressed to sustain their momentum by launching an offensive similar to the one in Morazan any time soon. Units elsewhere are not as large or well equipped and organized as those in the east. The insurgents probably will thus concentrate on localized attacks against military outposts and economic sabotage.

Guerrilla leaders remain divided over political and military strategy. In coming months, insurgent operations are likely to reflect more the priorities of individual factions than any blueprint of the joint command in Nicaragua. Specially trained units, however, are still able to carry out spectacular offensive missions, such as the destruction of the Oro Bridge last October and the sabotage in January of the airbase at Ilopango.





Prospects

The current trend of moliest government gains and setbacks on both the political and military fronts seems likely to continue over the next several months. The insurgents, meanwhile, do not appear able to launch a renewed large-scale offensive in the near term. They retain their ability, however, to intensify the war of attrition periodically.

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